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**RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS: CONFLICT AND LIMITED
COOPERATION IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA**

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Abstract

Russia and Turkey have enjoyed intensive economic cooperation since the 2000s. In spite of close economic ties between two countries, they have different foreign policy identities. These different identities and security perceptions sometimes create problems among two countries (like the case of Syria). The parties have had different perceptions in regional conflicts involving Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Libya, and Egypt, but these issues have not negatively affected bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey. However, having different perspectives on issues related to Syria has affected their relations negatively and especially interrupted their economic relationship in 2015. The complex interdependency between the two countries required the genesis of dialogue in mid-2016 with the initiation of Turkish officials. The coup d'état attempt to topple the Turkish president Erdoğan in Turkey resulted in an axis shift on Turkish foreign policy and led to a rapprochement with Russia. Russia and Turkey have since repaired their economic relationship and have tried to work out a compromise in the Syria case by organizing summits in Moscow and Astana. The economic realities and regional situation has forced both sides to push for cooperation, despite the different foreign policy identities which are Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism which still exist, restricting a stronger cooperation between these two countries.

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Keywords: Eurasianism, Euro-Atlanticism, Turkey, Russia, Cooperation-Conflict.



I. Introduction

In this study, Russia-Turkey relations are discussed based on the theoretical approach of Alexander Wendt (1992) in terms of the international relations system. Alexander Wendt is one of the most important representatives of constructivists and his article entitled “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics” is the basis of this study. His work was adopted to analyze Russia-Turkey relations to identify the reasons for conflict and the limited cooperation between these states. In this study, while chronological methodology is unavoidable, significant facts, tangible turning points and various perceptions approaches take centre stage in the study.

Wendt has focused on the significance of socially constructed identities of the states in the international relations system. According to him, states’ interests are both based on their own identities and their perceptions of each other determines each one’s policies and reactions (Wendt, 1992, 397-398). Wendt has also underlined the importance of a state’s perceptions of another state’s identity (Wendt, 1992, 397). In the case of Russia-Turkey relations, the historical foreign policy identities and the images of each state are still crucial. For instance, for Russia the image of Turkey and Armenia are dissimilar while for Turkey the image of Russia is not same as the image of Sweden. Therefore, historical image and socially constructed identities affect the reactions and reflections of the states differently when they have problems in their bilateral relations.

Russia and Turkey were in competition during their imperial periods, but they started to cooperate and have a close relationship in the first years of the war of salvation in Turkey in which the Russian Bolsheviks helped Mustafa Kemal due to his anti-imperialistic stance. After this short period, Turkey determined its choice by joining NATO, while on the other hand, the Soviet Union tried to export its ideology to the world by being the leader of Eastern Bloc Countries and Warsaw Pact. Under these circumstances, Turkey viewed the Soviet Union and its Communist ideology as the main threats for its “security-national interests” during the Cold War period. At the same time, Soviet Union also considered Turkey as the ally of USA and NATO in the region.

2. Problem Statement

Although Russia and Turkey have improved their economic cooperation, they have different perspectives regarding security in the international relations system which has created problems and inhibits their cooperation. However, the parties recently agreed to rapprochement on their bilateral relations. This study will clarify the foreign policy identity of both nations and it will also attempt to reveal the reasons for the conflict-competition and cooperation at the same time.

3. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are to investigate the main reasons behind the conflict and limited bilateral cooperation. The study also seeks to investigate the main reasons for the conflict and the distinctive features of Russian and Turkish foreign policy orientations.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main aim of this study is identify the restrictions of Russia-Turkey cooperation by referring to the international relations theory. To achieve this, the foreign policy identities and practices of both countries are discussed in this study.

5. Research Methods

In this study, the constructivist approach (Wendt, 1992) in international relations forms the theoretical basis while the discourses and practices of both countries' policy makers are analyzed comparatively. "Eurasianism", "Euro-Atlantism", and "Sunni Islamic" concepts-identities and their impacts are discussed in terms of the framework of foreign policy orientations of both countries. The publications of relevant scholars help to underpin the structure of the paper. Additionally, content analysis was employed to sift through and pinpoint the pertinent discourses and practices of policy makers collected from news agencies, newspapers and related electronic media.

6. Findings

Russia and Turkey have differently constructed foreign policy identities. However, recent developments have led to rapprochement between the two countries. In spite of their rapprochement, their differences still exist, which inhibit the level of the cooperation between the two regional powers. The issue of Syria became a major impediment to the cooperation between these two countries. Now, they are trying to reach a compromise on the issue of Syria and achieve a rapprochement on their bilateral relations.

6.1. Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russia-Turkey Competition

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey tried to expand its economic and political influence towards the Caucasus and Central Asia through cultural ties, where the peoples of the newly independent republics share same languages and similarities, according to the Turkish political elites. However, Russia is still interested in the region as the region was called "near abroad" in Russian Military doctrines (1993-2000).

Turkey and Russia have different perspectives and missions regarding the future of the region. Therefore, the rivalry among two countries in the region was initiated, and continued intensely until the end of the 1990s.

Turkey did not only pursue its efforts to increase its influence in the region, it was also one of the key players of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) set up in the region by assigning its military officers to train the military cadres of the newly independent republics especially Georgia-Azerbaijan. In the same period, Russia considered both NATO and the influences of Western institutions in the region as the main threats for its security interests.

Yevgeni Primakov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998) and Prime Minister (1998-1999) prioritized on "near abroad" policy more than his predecessors and he also focused on

rapprochement with Turkey and Iran. Hence, Turkey and Russia increased their economic cooperation and respected their vulnerabilities in domestic affairs, such as in the Chechen and Kurdish issues.

The Blue Stream natural gas project operations in 2005 and the increasing volume of trade among these two countries created a complex interdependency and discussion on the possibility of “strategic partnerships”. Vladimir Putin, President of Russian Federation and Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister of Turkey (now President) had established a very close relationship and repeatedly underlined that their main aim is to reach a 100billion US dollars on volume of trade between Russia and Turkey.

Although Russia and Turkey have succeeded in improving their relations on a bilateral level, they retained their differing perspectives on regional issues. Therefore, the relations between Russia and Turkey can be seen to possess a competition-conflict aspect while maintaining cooperation at the same time.

Russia has strengthened its Eurasianist perspective on foreign policy issues with the presidency of Putin while Turkey has tried to follow a multilateral foreign policy by keeping its close ties with USA, NATO and other institutions. Eventually, the different foreign policy identities of both countries reflected a rivalry in regional issues and conflicts. Turkish multilateral policy has been interpreted as a shift towards the Eurasian perspective by some scholars and politicians as well. However, Turkish Eurasianism differs from Russian Eurasianism, since the former does not have historical and intellectual background and is only based on a new foreign policy identity that emerged as a consciousness after the intervention in Kosova, Afghanistan and Iraq by USA according to Russian Eurasianist thinkers (Akgül, 2009). Russian Eurasianism, on the other hand, is foregrounded by an intellectual and historical background which defines the cultural, social and economic life in the lands of Russian empire and proclaimed the existence of an empire culture, representing the super ethno-Eurasian identity that comprises the combination of Slavs, Turkic and other Ural-Altay elements (Gumilév, 2000).

Eventually however, Russia-Turkey relations have developed on the basis of mutual economic benefits rather than philosophical and political integration; although, their “historical” enmity has continued to exist in their memories. This makes it clear that economic cooperation alone cannot lead to political integration. Both countries have exhibited their different stances in the conflicts of Abkhazia, South Osetia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and in Syrian Civil War. However, such differences have not affected their bilateral relations so far, since they have maintained their bilateral trade relations and rapprochement in social and cultural spheres as well.

6.2. Different Attitudes, Discourses, Political Identities and Conflict of Perspectives

Turkey has improved its relations with its neighbours, playing a constructive role in conflicting regions as a regional power until 2010s. Turkey and Syria even met as a joint cabinet in 2009 (Haber 7, 2009). Following such meetings, they agreed on operating regulations for visa free travel between Turkey and Syria in 2009. Turkish government officials and Erdoğan were talking positively about Syria and Assad before 2010s; Erdoğan and Assad were even holidaying together with their families and Erdoğan described Assad as his brother. However, Turkey changed its foreign policy perspective dramatically in the beginning of 2010s.

Turkey shifted its foreign policy from “zero problem” to “big brother” role in the Near East region by criticizing regimes and supporting the opposing movements during the so called “Arab Spring”. On the other hand, Russia has tried to maintain its involvement in the region establishing close ties with the concrete regimes in Syria, Libya and Egypt.

Turkey had justified its alterations in foreign policy by claiming the necessity of reform-democratization process both in Maghreb countries and in Syria. At that time, NATO interfered in Libya and called for an intervention in Syria and Turkey as a NATO member supported the discourses and attitudes of western countries and institutions (Star, 2014)

Additionally, Turkey’s government has positioned itself on the side of the Sunni-Salefi movements in the region, and Erdoğan has stated that “we may enter to Crimea, Cairo, Sarajevo proudly where CHP (Republican People’s Party) the main opposition party cannot enter and we will pray at Emevi Mosque with our friends”, Erdoğan also criticized CHP’s contacts with the Baas regime in Syria as well (Hurriyet, 2012). The Turkish government supported the Free Syrian Army against Bashar Assad’s Baas regime and condemned the Baaas regime and other actors involved with the Baas regime. Discourses and references of Turkish officials were closer to the Islamic Sunni world and symbols. Turkey’s foreign policy perspective could be considered more ideological rather than pragmatic which idealized the influential and powerful Turkey in ex-Ottoman territories which was perceived as neo-Ottomanism by Russia as well. For instance, Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Russia, has criticized Erdoğan and the Turkish policy in the region by defining it as a dangerous neo-Ottomanism including expansionist aspirations (Iskenderov, 2016).

On the other hand, Russia has justified its policy and involvement in the region by arguing about threats of fundamentalist-Salafi Islamic terrorism, such as ISIS. Russia also pointed that such terrorist movements would spread towards its southern regions and underlined the necessity of preservation of its naval base in Syria to provide technical and security aids for its commercial ships. Understandably, Russia’s investments which were worth almost \$ 19.4 billion in 2009 could not be neglected (Moscow Times, 2011).

Russia had close ties with these countries economically and militarily which was appropriate to its Eurasianist foreign policy perspective cum military doctrine as well. For instance, there were proclamations that Russia had proposed to establish a navy base in Libya at the meetings with Libyan officials (Wel Online, 2009). Additionally, the Russian investor Gazpromneft proposed to invest \$180 million for drilling of new oil fields in Libya and Russian railways were also ready to invest in the construction of a railway line between the cities of Bingazi and Sirt, (Russia Today, 2011; Railways Africa, 2011). On the other hand, Russia and Egypt became close after the dissolution of the Mursi government and Egypt proposed to buy weapons and war planes from Russia which reflected economic cooperation as well. In the meantime, USA suspended its relations with Egypt (Moscow Times, 2013).

Russia has expanded its Eurasianist perspective with its “near abroad” policy to the Middle East as well. The traditional Eurasianist perspective deals with the combination of cultural and political aspects. However, neo-Eurasianism could be identified as more pragmatic with a more geopolitical perspective and foreign policy-security identity as well (Özsağlam, 2015). Alexander Dugin, philosophical father of

the neo-Eurasianist perspective, posited this idea as part of his geopolitical philosophy which covers Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Iran within the Pan-Eurasian Zone (Özsağlam, 2015:170).

Russian Eurasianism also has a state centric perspective, which emphasizes on the control of the energy sector and market internationally to increase the prestige and economic prosperity of Russia and the Russian society (Özsağlam, 2013, 163). Hence, Russian involvement is inevitable in the southern part of the Eurasian geography as a part of the Russian foreign policy identity.

6.3. Shooting of the Russian War Plane: Blame Game

Although Russia and Turkey have been criticizing each other for their treatment of and policies in the case of Syrian Civil War, they did not interrupt and damage their bilateral economic and social relations until the shooting of the Russian jet by the Turkish Air Force in the Syria-Turkey border. After the shooting of the jet, Russia accused Turkey with Putin claiming that “Turkey is shielding the Islamic State from Russian attacks, do they want to make NATO serve ISIS?” (The Guardian, 2015). On the contrary, Turkey accused Russia of violating its air space, and Erdoğan warned Russia not to ‘play with fire’ (BBC, 2015).

The parties continued to blame each other and Russia immediately decided to suspend the visa free agreement with Turkey, and stopped charter flights to decrease the number of Russian tourists going to Turkey and limited the imports of Turkish agricultural products (Russia Today, 2015). Both sides have suffered from this “Blame Game” and “Sanctions”. However Turkey suffered more than Russia because Turkey lost the Russian market in tourism and in construction sectors, even though Russia continued to export its natural gas to Turkey. Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia and his Turkish colleague Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu attempted to sustain the dialogue at multilateral meetings. Nevertheless, the reconciliation of the relations between two countries could not move forward until the resignation of the Ahmet Davutoğlu government.

After the resignation of Ahmet Davutoglu in May 2016, Binalı Yıldırım, the President of Justice and Development Party (AKP) became the Prime Minister and appointed new ministers. After some time, the Turkish government changed its stance on bilateral relations with Russia. Erdoğan and Yıldırım sent celebration messages to Putin and Medvedev for the Russian National Day on 14th June 2016 (BBC Turkish, 2016). Afterward, Kremlin stated that Erdoğan sent a letter to Putin on 27th June 2016 and apologized for the shooting down of the Russian jet by the Turkish military, (Stubbs & Solovyov, 2016). This letter played a significant role in repairing the relations among Russia and Turkey in which Turkey was suffering from Russian sanctions on trade and tourism sectors, in addition to the Russian suspension of its construction projects operated by Turkish firms in Russia.

6.4. 15 July Coup d’état Attempt and Rapprochement between Russia and Turkey

On the evening of 15th July 2016, some officials of the Turkish Army attempted a coup d’état against President Erdoğan and the government in Turkey. However, Erdoğan and the government resisted the attempt successfully. After this attempt, Erdoğan and Yıldırım revealed that Fethullah Gülen and its associates were responsible for this coup d’état and they accused officials of USA due to the fact that

Gülen resided in USA (Sputnik Turkish, 16 July 2016). Putin condemned the coup d'état attempt and some experts accented that Putin would use the political atmosphere to affect the orientation of Turkish foreign policy especially in the Syria case (Bender, 2016) Many speculations have arisen regarding the coup d'état and one of them was that Russian intelligence warned Erdoğan before the coup d'état attempt (The Moscow Times, 2016). After this, Erdoğan and Putin began to contact each other personally and Erdoğan made his first foreign trip to Russia and met with Putin in St. Petersburg in August 2016. After the meeting, the parties agreed to rapprochement and establish a deep relationship on economic and security issues as well. Erdoğan's visit was a kind of message for Western institutions and states (NTV 10 August 2016), which signalled the axis shift of Turkish foreign policy as well.

Russia and Turkey have entered the rapprochement process on their relations and increased their diplomatic affairs in which they have put regional conflicts and combating terrorism on their cooperation agenda as well. Turkey has changed its policy on the Syria issue and focused on combating terrorism by cooperating with Russia. Russia and Turkey share similar attitudes regarding the territorial integrity of Syria. Moreover, Turkey is not insisting on the withdrawal of Assad from the government like before. Eventually, Russia, Turkey and Iran reached a consensus in the Syrian Civil War to cease fire and find peaceful solutions, inviting the conflicting parties in Syria to a summit in Moscow in December 2016. After this summit, Russia and Turkey obtained the status of *guarantor* for the cease-fire in Syria. Following this summit, the parties held second and third summits on the Syrian Civil War in Astana. The choice of venue of the summits are meaningful as political messages which are relevant to both Eurasian geography and perspectives.

7. Conclusion and Implications

Russia and Turkey have sustained both intensive economic relations and complex interdependence since the 2000s. Russia and Turkey also have close relations socially, yet they could not achieve cooperation in political and military regional issues because of their differing foreign policy attitudes. However, these differing attitudes did not create a tangible problem for Russia-Turkey bilateral relations until the Syria issue.

After the coup d'état attempt to topple Erdoğan in Turkey, the Turkish government and Erdoğan attempted a reconciliation with Russia since the Turkish government has accused Western governments as responsible for the coup d'état attempt. Therefore, Russia and Turkey have started to repair their bilateral relations in the economic sphere and also agreed to cooperate on the solution of the Syrian issue. Russia has emphasized and increased its expectations on Russia-Turkey relations as part of its Eurasianist foreign policy perspective-identity. However, Turkey is still attempting to operate by a multilateral foreign policy and maintain close ties to the Eurasian perspective. Turkey is still a member of NATO and retains the core value of its Euro-Atlantic security identity which will limit its cooperation with Russia in the region on military and political issues.

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